Fanny Hill

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(Redirected from John Cleland's Memoirs of a Woman of Pleasure)

Fanny Hill Memoirs of a Woman of Pleasure Fanny Hill 1749 edition title page.jpg

One of earliest editions, 1749 (M.DCC.XLIX)

Author John Cleland

Original title Memoirs of a Woman of Pleasure

Country United Kingdom

Language English

Genre Erotic novel

Publication date

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Illustration to Fanny Hill by Édouard-Henri Avril.

Memoirs of a Woman of Pleasure (popularly known as Fanny Hill) is an erotic novel by English novelist John Cleland first published in London in 1748. Written while the author was in debtors' prison in London,[1][2] it is considered "the first original English prose pornography, and the first pornography to use the form of the novel".[3] One of the most prosecuted and banned books in history,[4] it has become a synonym for obscenity.[5]

Publishing history

The novel was published in two installments, on November 21, 1748 and February 1749, respectively, by "G. Fenton", actually Fenton Griffiths and his brother Ralph.[6] Initially, there was no governmental reaction to the novel, and it was only in November 1749, a year after the first instalment was published, that Cleland and Ralph Griffiths were arrested and charged with "corrupting the King's subjects." In court, Cleland renounced the novel and it was officially withdrawn.

However, as the book became popular, pirate editions appeared. It was once suspected that the sodomy scene near the end that Fanny witnesses in disgust was an interpolation made for these pirated editions, but as Peter Sabor states in the introduction to the Oxford edition of Memoirs (1985), that scene is present in the first edition (p. xxiii). In the 19th century, copies of the book sold underground in the UK, the US and elsewhere.[7]

The book eventually made its way to the United States. In 1821, in the first known obscenity case in the United States, a Massachusetts court outlawed Fanny Hill. The publisher, Peter Holmes, was convicted for printing a "lewd and obscene" novel. Holmes appealed to the Massachusetts Supreme Court. He claimed that the judge, relying only on the prosecution's description, had not even seen the book. The state Supreme Court wasn't swayed. The Chief Justice wrote that Holmes was "a scandalous and evil disposed person" who had contrived to "debauch and corrupt" the

citizens of Massachusetts and "to raise and create in their minds inordinate and lustful desires."

Mayflower (U.K.) edition

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It was not until 1963, after the failure of the British obscenity trial of Lady Chatterley's Lover in 1960 that Mayflower Books, run by Gareth Powell, published an unexpurgated paperback version of Fanny Hill. The police became aware of the 1963 edition a few days before publication, after spotting a sign in the window of the Magic Shop in Tottenham Court Road in London, run by Ralph Gold. An officer went to the shop and bought a copy and delivered it to the Bow Street magistrate Sir Robert Blundell, who issued a search warrant. At the same time, two officers from the vice squad visited Mayflower Books in Vauxhall Bridge Road to determine whether quantities of the book were kept on the premises. They interviewed the publisher, Gareth Powell, and took away the only five copies there. The police returned to the Magic Shop and seized 171 copies of the book, and in December Ralph Gold was summonsed under section 3 of the Obscenity Act. By then, Mayflower had distributed 82,000 copies of the book, but it was Gold rather than Mayflower or Fanny Hill who was being tried, although Mayflower covered the legal costs. The trial took place in February 1964. The defence argued that Fanny Hill was a historical source book and that it was a joyful celebration of normal non-perverted sex—bawdy rather than pornographic. The prosecution countered by stressing one atypical scene involving flagellation, and won. Mayflower decided not to appeal.

The Mayflower case had highlighted the growing disconnect between the obscenity laws and the social realities of late 1960s Britain, and was instrumental in shifting views to the point where in 1970 an unexpurgated version of Fanny Hill was once again published in Britain.

First U.S. edition

In 1963, Putnam published the book in the United States under the title John Cleland's Memoirs of a Woman of Pleasure. This edition was also immediately banned for obscenity in Massachusetts, after a mother complained to the state’s Obscene Literature Control Commission.[7] The publisher's challenge to the ban went up to the Supreme Court. In a landmark decision in 1966, the United States Supreme Court ruled in Memoirs v. Massachusetts that Fanny Hill did not meet the Roth standard for obscenity.

The art historian Johann Joachim Winckelmann recommended the work in a letter for "its delicate sensitivities and noble ideas" expressed in "an elevated Pindaric style".[8]

Illustrations

Editions of the book have frequently featured illustrations, but they have often been of poor quality.[9] An exception to this is the set of mezzotints, probably designed by the artist George Morland and engraved by his friend John Raphael Smith that accompanied one edition.

Plot

This article's plot summary may be too long or excessively detailed. Please help improve it by removing unnecessary details and making it more concise. (February 2014)

The book is written as a series of letters from Frances "Fanny" Hill to an unknown woman, with Fanny justifying her life-choices to this individual. At the beginning of her tale, Fanny Hill is a young girl with a rudimentary education living in a small village near Liverpool. Shortly after she turns 15, both her parents die. Esther Davis, a girl from Fanny's village who has since moved to London, convinces Fanny to move to the city as well, but Esther abandons Fanny once they arrive. Fanny hopes to find work as a maid, and is hired by Mrs. Brown, a woman she believes to be a wealthy lady. Mrs. Brown is in fact a madam (pimp) and intends the innocent Fanny to work for her as a prostitute. Mrs. Brown's associate, Phoebe Ayers, shares a bed with Fanny and introduces her to sexual pleasure. Mrs. Brown plans to sell Fanny's virginity to an ugly old man, but Fanny is repulsed by the man and struggles with him. She is saved from rape by Mrs. Brown's maid. After this ordeal, Fanny falls into a fever for several days. Mrs. Brown, realizing that Fanny's virginity is still intact, decides to sell Fanny's sexual favors to the exceedingly rich Lord B., who is due to arrive in a few weeks.

Fanny spies on Mrs. Brown having sex with a large, muscular man. She talks to Phoebe, who assures her that it is possible for a young girl to have sex with a well-endowed man. She takes Fanny to spy on another prostitute, Polly Phillips, having sex with a handsome and well-endowed young Genovese merchant. Afterward, Phoebe and Fanny engage in mutual masturbation and Fanny looks forward to her first time having sex with a man.

Soon afterward, Fanny meets Charles, a 19-year-old wealthy nobleman, and they fall in lust instantly. Charles helps Fanny escape the brothel the next day, and takes her to his flat at St. James's, London, and introduces her to his landlady, Mrs. Jones. For many months, Charles visits Fanny almost daily to have sex. Fanny works hard to become more educated and urbane. After eight months, Fanny becomes pregnant. Three months later, Charles mysteriously disappears. Mrs. Jones learns that Charles' father has kidnapped Charles and sent him to the South Seas to win a fortune. Upset by the news that Charles will be gone for at least three years, Fanny miscarries and falls ill. She is nursed back to health by Mrs. Jones, but sinks into a deep depression.

Mrs. Jones tells Fanny that the now-16-year-old girl must work as a prostitute for her, and introduces her to Mr. H, a tall, rich, muscular, hairy-chested man. Fanny unwittingly drinks an aphrodisiac, and has sex with Mr. H. She concludes that sex can be had for pleasure, not just love. Mr. H puts Fanny up in a new apartment and begins paying her with jewels, clothes, and art. After seven months, Fanny discovers that Mr. H has been having sex with her maid, so she resolves to seduce Will, Mr. H's 19-year-old servant. A month later, Mr. H catches Fanny having sex with Will, and stops supporting her.

Fanny is taken in by Mrs. Cole, the mistress of one of Mr. H's friends, who also happens to run a brothel in the Covent Garden neighborhood of

London. Fanny meets three other prostitutes, who are also living in the house:

Emily, a blonde girl in her early 20s who ran away at the age of 14 from her country home to London. She met a 15-year-old boy who, being sexually experienced, engaged in sexual intercourse with virgin Emily. Although the two lived together a short time, Emily became a street prostitute for a few years before being taken in by Mrs. Cole.

Harriet, a brunette and an orphan raised by her aunt, had her first sexual experience with the son of Lord N., a nobleman whose estate adjoined her relative's.

Louisa, the bastard daughter of a cabinetmaker and a maid who entered puberty at a very young age and began engaging in extensive masturbation. While visiting her mother in London, Louisa began masturbating in a booked bedroom. The lady who had rented the rooms' 19-year-old son caught her and made love to the 13-year-old girl. Louisa spent the next few years having sex with as many men as she could and turned to prostitution as a means of satisfying her lust.

A short time later, Fanny participates in an orgy with the three girls and four rich noblemen. Fanny and her young nobleman begin a relationship, but it ends after a few months because the young man moves to Ireland. Mrs. Cole next introduces Fanny to Mr. Norbert, an impotent alcoholic and drug addict who engages in rape fantasies with prostitutes. Unhappy with Mr. Norbert's impotence, Fanny engages in anonymous sex with a sailor in the Royal Navy. However, Mr. Norbert soon dies. Mrs. Cole then introduces Fanny to Mr. Barville, a rich, young masochist who requires whipping to enjoy sex. After a short affair, Fanny begins a sexual relationship with an elderly customer who becomes sexually aroused by caressing her hair and biting the fingertips off her gloves. After this ends, Fanny enters a period of celibacy.

Emily and Louisa go to a drag ball, where Emily meets a bisexual young man who believes Emily is a male. When he finds out that she is actually a female, he has sex with Emily in his carriage. Fanny is confused by her first encounter with male homosexuality. Shortly after this incident, Fanny takes a ride in the country and ends up paying for a room at a public tavern after her carriage breaks down. She spies on two young men engaging in anal sex in the next room. Startled, she falls off a stool and knocks herself unconscious. Although the two men have left, she still rouses the villagers to try to hunt the two men down and punish them.

Some weeks later, Fanny watches as Louisa seduces the teenage son of a local woman. The boy, clearly a virgin, engages in somewhat violent, brutal sex several times with Louisa. Louisa leaves Mrs. Cole's brothel a short time later after falling in love with another young man. Emily and Fanny are then invited by two gentleman to a country estate. They swim in a stream, and the two men have sex with the girls for several hours. Emily's parents soon find their daughter, and (unaware of her career as a prostitute) ask her to come home again. She accepts.

Mrs. Cole retires, and Fanny starts living off her savings. One day she encounters a man of 60 who looks 45 due to his lifestyle. The man falls in love with Fanny but treats her like his daughter. He dies and leaves his

small fortune to her. Now 18 years old, Fanny uses her new wealth to try to locate Charles. She learns that he disappeared two and a half years ago after reaching the South Seas. Several months later, a despondent Fanny takes a trip to see Mrs. Cole (who had retired to Liverpool), but a storm forces her to stop at an inn along the way, where she runs into Charles: He had come back to England but was shipwrecked on the Irish coast. Fanny and Charles get a room together and make love several times. Fanny tells Charles everything about her life of vice, but he forgives her and asks Fanny to marry him, which she does.